

James Wright and (The) Minneapolis (Poem) : Some brief notes for understanding the poet, the people, the place

著者	Herlofsky William J.
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James Wright and (The) Minneapolis (Poem)

—Some brief notes for understanding the poet, the people, the place—

William J. Herlofsky

1. Introduction

In an earlier research paper (Herlofsky 2002) on the different aspects of iconicity in poetry, I included examples from two of James Wright's poems, 'The Minneapolis Poem' and 'Hook', two poems set in the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the present short discussion, I will attempt to illustrate how knowledge of the poet, the place, and the people, can assist in the understanding a poem. In what follows I will offer a brief introduction to the city of Minneapolis at the time that 'The Minneapolis Poem' was written, as well as a brief discussion of the poet James Wright, and his connection to Minneapolis and its people, especially some of the history behind the location and setting of these poems, and how James Wright's own situation, and the changing landscape of Minneapolis may have affected the content of this poem.

2. The poem

The poem to be discussed in this article is Wright's 'The Minneapolis Poem', which appears below:

The Minneapolis Poem
To John Logan

1

I wonder how many old men last winter
Hungry and frightened by namelessness prowled
The Mississippi shore
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river.
The police remove their cadavers by daybreak
And turn them in somewhere.
Where?
How does the city keep lists of its fathers

Who have no names?
By Nicollet Island I gaze down at the dark water
So beautifully slow.
And wish my brothers good luck
And a warm grave.

2

The Chippewa young men
Stab one another shrieking
Jesus Christ
Split-lipped homosexuals limp in terror of assault.
High school backfields search under benches
Near the Post Office. Their faces are the rich
Raw bacon without eyes.
The Walker Art Center crowd stare
At the Guthrie Theater.

3

Tall Negro girls from Chicago
Listen to light songs.
They know when the supposed patron
Is a plainclothesman.
A cop's palm
Is a roach dangling down the scorched fangs
Of a light bulb.
The soul of a cop's eyes
Is an eternity of Sunday daybreak in the suburbs
Of Juarez, Mexico.

4

The legless beggars are gone, carried away
By white birds.
The Artificial Limbs Exchange is gutted
And sown with lime.
The whalebone crutches and hand-me-down trusses
Huddle together dreaming of desolation

Of dry groins.
I think of poor men astonished to waken
Exposed in broad daylight by the blade
Of a strange plough.

5

All over the walls of comb cells
Automobiles perfumed and blindered
Consent with a mutter of high good humor
To take their two naps a day.
Without sound windows glide back
into dusk
The sockets of a thousand blind bee graves tier upon tier
Tower not quite toppling.
There are men in this city who labor dawn after dawn
To sell me my death.

6

But I could not bear
To allow my poor brother my body to die
In Minneapolis.
The old man Walt Whitman our countryman
Is now in America our country
Dead.
But he was not buried in Minneapolis
At least.
And no more may I be Please God.

7

I want to be lifted up
By some great white bird unknown to the police.
And soar for a thousand miles and be carefully hidden
Modest and golden as one last corn grain,
Stored with the secrets of the wheat and the mysterious lives
Of the unnamed poor.

Of course, one of the first questions we can ask is what does this all mean? The following sections will not be concerned with discussing the meaning of the poem in its entirety, but instead, after a brief discussion of James Wright and his connection to Minneapolis, will focus on a discussion of the people and the places where this poem is set, in the hope that this will add to the overall understanding of the poem, the poet, and the place.

3. The poet

James Arlington Wright was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio, on December 13th, 1927. He traveled much in the United States during his adult life (a life cut much too short, ending in March of 1980), and spent much of the period between the fall of 1957, and the summer of 1966, in the Minneapolis/Saint Paul, Minnesota area. A number of poems written in, or inspired by, that period of time, are set in Minnesota, and two of the poems discussed in Herlofsky (2002) are representative of these Minnesota/Minneapolis poems, 'The Minneapolis Poem' and 'Hook', which are set in an area depicted in a number of his poems, the area once known as the Nicollet Island/Gateway, and later, 'skid-row' district of Minneapolis. James Wright was interested in the hobos, the bums, the homeless of this skid-row area, often taking their viewpoint as if it were his own, and as Hass (1984: 31) has suggested, one of the remarkable things about Wright's poetry "is the way in which the suffering of other people, particularly the lost and derelict, is actually a part of his own emotional life".

From Wright's letters (Wright 2005), it is clear that he was having problems at work (at the University of Minnesota), as well as problems with drinking, during his time in Minnesota, although he himself was not actually living on skid-row. It is true, however, quoting Hass (1984: 35) once again, that his poetry of that period had "a continuous bone-aching loneliness, a continuous return to and caressing of the dark, a terror of the cold dark, a compassion for whoever suffers it." It is this loneliness, this darkness, and this compassion, that play important parts in the discussion of people and place in the poem that appears in section 2.

4. The place and the people

A certain part of downtown Minneapolis was the setting for a number of James Wright's poems. The discussion of this area of Minneapolis and its inhabitants in this section will not be as extreme as Perec's project that Jones (2006) describes as an attempt "to record what took place in a single Parisian square in a period of less than twenty-four hours", but nonetheless will remain true to some aspects of this undertaking, in that in the following discussion we recognize that both 'people' and 'place' are important, and will therefore be interested in the landscape as well as the inhabitants that are important to Wright's poems. As Jones (2006: xviii) states, with the recognition of the importance (and

interaction) of both people and place:

It follows from this dual recognition that the city's history lies in the interaction between individuals and time, and between ecology and community. In this we can remain true to Perec's project, taking physical site, and including as our quarry the individuals ('people') Perec's experiment also reminds us that the individuals whose presence in the square he records do not seem to compose a homogeneous community. Rather, they form a random collection of individuals.

The setting for 'The Minneapolis Poem' to be examined here is what was called the Nicollet Island/Gateway District of Minneapolis in the early 1960s, home to a heterogeneous (though perhaps not all heterosexual) section of the Minneapolis community. As noted in Millett (1992), this area began to decline in the beginning of the twentieth century, and by the 1950s, it was the center of the Minneapolis version of 'skid row'. Hirschhoff and Hart (2002: 3) describe this area as "a neighborhood of bars, flophouses, pawnshops, and secondhand stores; charity missions and social service agencies; small-time wholesalers and manufacturers; and office buildings that had aged past their prime". As for the people in that area, Hirschhoff and Hart (2002: 50) also state that "a 1951 Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce report, divided the residents of skid row into "petty criminals and human derelicts roaming among the industrious men and women who reside in the area only by force of economic circumstances".

In 1959, one of the first extensive urban renewal projects in the United States was begun in the Gateway District, which in turn caused many of the "human derelicts" who lived there to be forced out of their 'natural environment' and onto a small island on the Mississippi River just east of the downtown area of Minneapolis, Nicollet Island, and onto the river's banks. Although many were opposed to the renewal program, some, even some of those on skid row, seemed to support the program in principle, as the quotes from Hirschhoff and Hart (2002: 51) suggest:

The press interviewed a handful of skid rowers who seemed to agree with the plan. "I don't mind where I live," one man said, "if I can have companionship." Another old-timer told reporters, "If they tear this building down I suppose I'll have to move. But I hope they put up a new Skid Row before they move us out. We can't live in a vacant lot.

It was these vacant lots (lots resulting from the demolition of buildings like the "Artificial Limbs Exchange" building, that was near the "post office" and the "high school"), and these displaced people looking for companionship that became the setting of many James Wright poems. And in fact, 'The Minneapolis Poem', published in 1968 in *We Shall Gather at the River*, seems to have begun in 1964,

in a December 2, 1964 draft (found in the Manuscripts Division of the Elmer L. Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota), and appears to be somewhat of a reaction to the renewal and expansion project. This earlier 12-2-64 version was originally titled ‘An Ode Written in Honor of the New Municipal Expansion Program in the City of Minneapolis’, has four stanzas, with the second stanza beginning with the following statement about the results of the renewal project:

The skid-road is gone, and the poor who lived there:
The sour-eyed Chippewa young men, who stabbed one another
Who used to shriek the name Jesus Christ

In the 1968 published version of this portion, as seen in section 2, repeated below, the reference to ‘skid-road’ is deleted, and the past tense is changed to present, but even in the slimmed-down version, the setting referred to is the same:

The Chippewa young men
Stab one another shrieking
Jesus Christ

It is not always the case that the published (1968) version is shorter than the earlier (1964) draft. For example, the last four lines of the first stanza in the published version, the location, Nicollet Island, is specifically mentioned,

By Nicollet Island I gaze down at the dark water
So beautifully slow.
And I wish my brothers good luck
And a warm grave.

This is longer than the last the last three lines of the first stanza in the draft:

I gaze down at the river, so beautifully slow,
And wish my brothers good luck
And a warm grave.

According to Hirschhoff and Hart (2002: 52), one of the most enduring legacies of the Gateway redevelopment program was “to leave its most vulnerable citizens without any protection”. After the redevelopment program the bums and hoboes “on skid row were left to fend for themselves in a

city where low-income housing was scarce”. From articles in the Minneapolis Tribune, Hirschhoff and Hart (2002: 52) summarize the lonely feeling of the men leaving their friends at the flop houses and missions that were being torn down:

As the men attended their last mission masses, nibbled their final coffee-an’s, shook hands, and said good-bye, many of them grieved openly for the loss of the only home and family they had ever known. “We seen more adult tears in the last three months”, remarked the Union City Mission superintendent as the wreckers moved in on his building. “One man said he’d never leave. They found him in the river last week.”

There is no way of knowing if James Wright read the newspaper articles with these quotes in the early 1960s, but his 12-2-64 draft of the ode to municipal expansion program (written probably after the city was beginning to be rebuilt) does include the following lines:

....

But now, as the city rises, its face glitters

....

I wonder how many old men last winter,
Hungry and frightened by namelessness, prowled the river bank
Lashed blind by the wind, dreaming
Of suicide in the river

....

The skid-road is gone, and the poor who lived there

....

I think of poor men, astonished to waken, suddenly
Exposed in broad daylight by the blade of some strange plough,

....

The city fathers have fumigated
And swept out of sight
The syphilitic lesbians, hysterical suicides,
Like bugs down a lye-scarred sewer

Most of these lines do not appear in the final version of the poem, but they do indicate that some of the original focus of the poem was the displacement and disorientation of the poor when they were forced to leave the Gateway area. It is knowledge of the place and the plight of those people that can give the reader a deeper understanding and appreciation of the poem. Please read the poem in section

2 again, and see if this brief discussion has assisted toward that goal.

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